

JULY 1, 1971/35¢ A JOHNSON PUBLICATION

JET

MEET THE MAN
WHO CREATED
'SWEETBACK'

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES



"Back home," Van Peebles poses on Chicago's Michigan Ave.

MEET THE MAN BEHIND 'SWEETBACK' MOVIE

By **CHESTER HIGGINS**
JET Senior Editor

There is a tattoo, like a thin, perforated chain of red and black pearls circling the lower neck of filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles. A tattooed inscription in French nearby invites the viewer to "cut along here." With a sly wink to his sometimes heavy-lidded eyes, Van Peebles confides:

"There is another tattooed statement down here (pointing to his hip). It simply says, 'If You Can'—it's a warning. You're in

Sweeping nation as No. 1 box office smash, Sweetback draws long lines of Blacks to theatres like Chicago's Oriental in the Loop.



trouble, Jim, if you try to follow the upper instructions without knowing what's going on down here."

Since Van Peebles' blockbuster film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baad-Asssss Song*, hit the market late in May, every white critic who has bothered to review the movie at all, has attempted to take Van Peebles up on his throat-slitting invitation, without being hip, if that is the word, to the word of warning tattooed on his posterior. The film is about a Black stud who kills some white cops—and bloodhounds—and gets away!

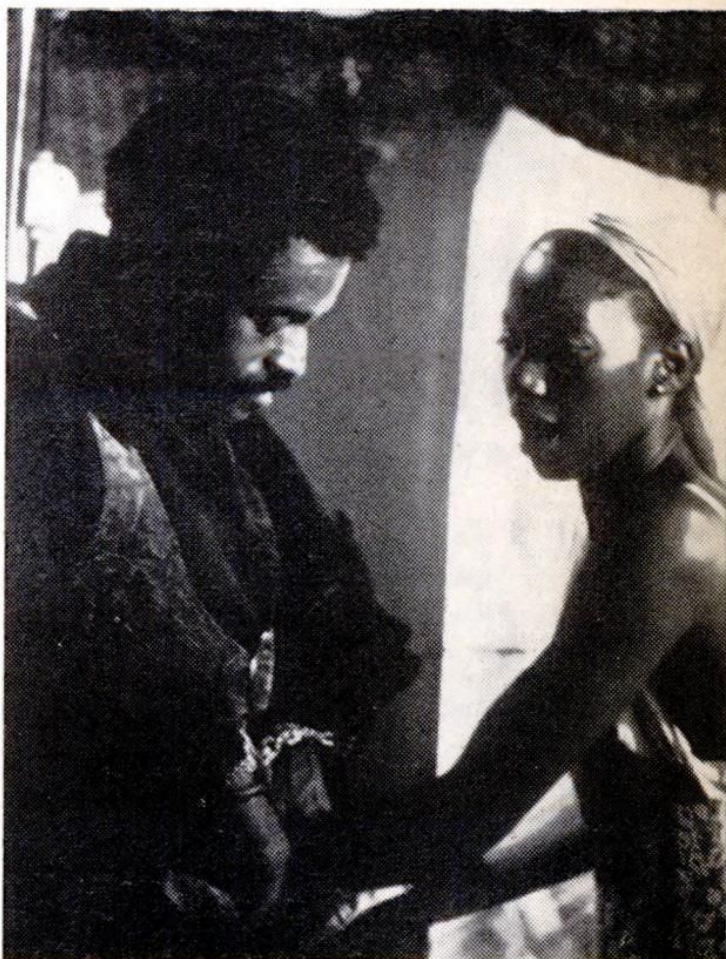
Not possessing the technical knowledge of filmmaking of the movie critics, Blacks have been swarming to theatres, where the film is playing, in fantastic droves. In its first nine weeks of showing (it opened March 30 at Detroit's Grand Circus Theatre and smashed all existing house records; did the same at Atlanta's (Ga.) Coronet Theatre), the film grossed \$2.6 million, wiping the sneers of derision from the lips of skeptical white theatre owners, replacing them with beaming smiles of servility.

Yet, through it all, Van Peebles asserts: "I have never been invited on a national TV show—Johnny Carson, Dick Cavett, Merv Griffin. None of them. I have appeared on local shows in various parts of the country, but not on a network TV show."

The bitter humor bites at the

edges of Van Peebles' smile; it makes him laugh loudly, at times. His one-inch thick beard is flecked with gray, but his face is remarkably free of care wrinkles and his complexion is clear, brown and healthy. Van Peebles turns 38, Aug. 22, and the years of struggle to make it where he is today—America's top Black movie director—have not been easy ones for him.

Born in Chicago, the son of a South Side tailor shop owner, Van Peebles, according to his own estimate, "attended a number of high schools before graduating." He is closemouthed about his past. He categorically refuses to give autographs, declares this permits the Black autograph seeker "to cop out and bask in my glory instead of getting off his can and doing



Playing role of a sexed-up chippie, singer Rhetta Hughes makes amorous pass at manacled Sweetback.

Van Peebles To Make Money On Film In Record Time

something on his own." The director does not like to eat lunch because, he says, this "makes me kind, understanding, and sexy; all them things."

An Italian-like cheroot (cigar) ever present, Van Peebles will talk freely of the trials and tribulations that confront a Black filmmaker in the U. S., but will clam up when it comes to talking of his background. He's tough, abrasive, swears loud and often, painting the air blue with expressions and words regarded by many people as profanities and obscenities. Yet, he chuckles at things that would drive most men up the wall.

In his Columbia Pictures' office where he was director and had creative control of the movie,

Van Peebles dons conductor's cap as old friend 'Frisco cable car conductor Jose Williams looks on.



Watermelon Man, a farce about a white suburban bigot who turned Black one night, starring comedian Godfrey Cambridge and Estelle Parsons, Van Peebles tacked up this inscription: "Please, for your own safety don't try to understand me too @#\$\$%&*\$\$% quickly!"

"I meant that," he laughs. "I don't understand myself after nearly 38 years, how you gonna understand me and where I'm coming from after just a half hour or so conference or interview?"

Van Peebles is the whole show in *Sweetback*. He is producer, director, composer, star, musical scorer, editor; he even owns distributing rights and has leased the film to Cinamation, Inc., for a period of only seven years.

While it takes most films three years to recoup the amount spent to make them (Van Peebles refuses to divulge the amount it cost to film *Sweetback* but some estimates put it up as high as \$500,000; others as low as \$250,000), Van Peebles is comfortably certain this film will reach the break even point "much sooner."

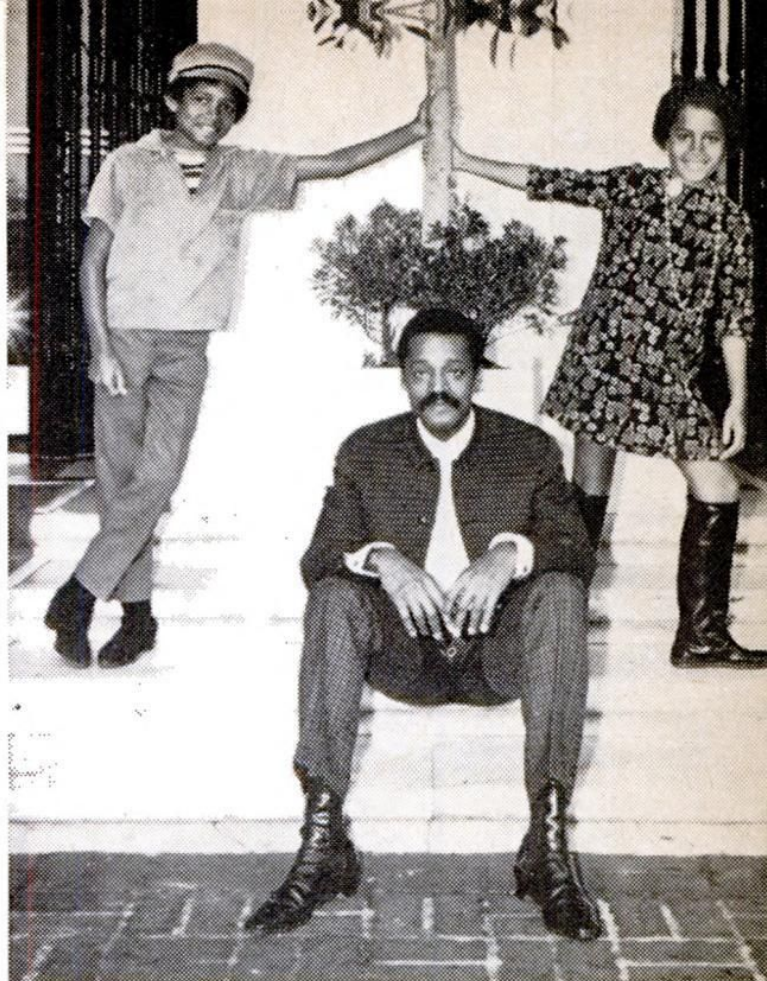
The Black filmmaker won't talk about it, but he has a degree in English literature from Ohio Wesleyan University. He enrolled under the GI bill at the University of Amsterdam, studying astrology. He was a navigator with the U. S. Air Force for three and one-half years, but despite this, Van Peebles couldn't get employment as an airline navigator and was forced to accept a job as a gripman on the picturesque San Fran-

cisco cable cars. He was fired from this job by a superior who couldn't stomach the fact that Van Peebles (he added the Van to his name when he went to Holland) is an author. Van Peebles had written a book, *The Big Heart*, with photographs by Ruth Bernhard, and it was about his observations on the cable car run. Earlier he had written a book about a Chicago neighborhood gang who beat him up regularly called, *A Bear For The FBI*.

Van Peebles entered an interracial marriage, has two children: son, Mario, 13, who was seen in the sexily explicit opening act of the film, and daughter, Megan, 12, also in the film. The marriage didn't work and Van Peebles was later to say, "To stand on my own hind legs, I sort of sacrificed them."

In Holland, he joined the Dutch National Theatre and toured the country in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*. After his marriage came to an end, he hitch hiked to France, interested the French in three short films he had made while working on cable cars in San Francisco. He soon learned that France wasn't much more enthusiastic about permitting a Black film director to enter the hallowed ranks, than the U. S. screen writers and directors guilds. He had fled the U. S. in order to do his thing in films, only to find he would be blocked from doing so in France, as well. But there is a neat loophole: in France, a writer may direct the screen version of his own work.

Van Peebles needed no addi-



Visiting San Francisco, Van Peebles is visited at Mark Hopkins Hotel, by son, Mario; daughter, Megan.

tional encouragement. He wrote a tenderly humorous film script, *The Story Of The Three-Day Pass*, about a Black GI on a weekend love tryst with a French girl. It was taken from his novel of the same name and with that bit of directing under his belt, Van Peebles applied at the French Film Center to take the directors examination. "It took me ten years," sighed Van Peebles, "but I did it." His film was entered as a French offering in the 1967 San Francisco Film Festival and won the top award.

He has written five books, is about to put a play on Broadway, and with the money he made from directing *Watermelon Man*, he launched the film, *Sweetback*.

Already there is a *Sweetback*

Sweetback Victory Like Indians Ripping Off John Wayne

LP of the same name issued by Stax Record Co. Van Peebles has set down in paperback his trials, tribulations and triumphs in the making of *Sweetback* (*Sweet Sweetback's BaadAsssss Song*, Lancer, \$1).

Blacks simply love the film. The love is profound in a very personal way, a way that says reams about the Black condition. Although white critics are at once attracted and repelled by the movie, Blacks understand the character Sweetback very well. Sure, he's a freak show stud, but Van Peebles plays him with such a cool, nonverbal tenacity that even he becomes more real than life.

Whites don't know that the Black hipster is a character whose very life and existence depends on keen judgment of human character and the quick structuring of action based on that on-the-spot assessment. Not talk. If he spent his time talking he would not only be considered a clown, however, benign and goodnatured, but he would attract attention to himself in situations that could be dangerous in the extreme and which could blow his whole game.

Van Peebles' street talk also covers up the fact he is a linguist of a sort, with a fine ear for languages, speaking French and Dutch as well as English. He writes also in French. How he comes to make the *Sweetback* film is revealing of his personality. He writes that in February, 1970, he

was driving on a highway in the Mojave desert. Something was bothering him.

"Some idea was lurking there in the back of my mind, waiting for the coast to clear to be born. I gravitated toward some pilings . . . , parked the car in a little dip . . . , got out facing the sun, leaned back against the front fender of the car getting myself comfortable . . . I was on a mission," Van Peebles adds, sardonically.

His interpersonal relationships with cast and crew during the filming were interesting if uneven. He was constantly under pressures because of money (once he was down to his last \$13 and pay day was coming up, when comedian Bill Cosby came through with a \$50,000 loan). His best girl fell out with him and "stopped speaking because she didn't want me to use my own son in the title sequence of *Sweetback*." He was determined to shoot the movie in 35 millimeters and in color "because I wanted Blacks to have a handsomely filmed movie as well." But he found he could save money and get desired effects by using a 16 millimeter camera in some chase scenes. So he did some of that. The name of the film came under question at many movie houses. "They wanted to change it, but I said, 'Ya momma'." He went to court to challenge the Motion Picture Assn. of America's president's, Jack Valenti, right to designate his film as X-rated.